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SUBJECT: SLOVAKS PURSUING AVIAN INFLUENZA AND PANDEMIC PROTECTION

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1. (SBU) Summary. Officials from the GOS appear to be making good progress on contingency planning for an outbreak of avian influenza (AI) as well as the possibility of a human-to-human pandemic disease. Ministry of Health State Secretary Alexandra Novotna (also Deputy Health Minister and

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a medical doctor) explained to DCM, Econoff, and Post Medical Officer that Slovakia has updated its "framework" national action plan, which should be discussed and approved by the Slovak cabinet on October 26. The Ministry also has a specific plan that details exactly what should be done in terms of protecting bird populations and promoting awareness among those working with birds, who should do it, and how it should be accomplished. Novotna also stressed that the plan includes elements of public education, simulation exercises and that it is highly adaptable to changing circumstances. End Summary.

AVIAN INFLUENZA

2. (SBU) The GOS is working with its 2,000 poultry workers, veterinary staffs, and medical providers to ensure that they are aware of the risks and procedures that will mitigate the danger. Poultry workers have been encouraged to get a seasonal influenza injection and a leaflet has been drafted explaining the difference between normal and avian influenza. Though Novotna did not specify the size of Slovakia's Tamiflu inventories, she did claim that it had enough to treat at risk workers should the need arise. The State Veterinary and Food Administration has also implemented specific new rules that prohibit live birds in markets, competitions, and veterinary organizations as well as carrier pigeon competitions (inside Slovakia and Slovak participation internationally) and the hunting of wild birds.

PANDEMIC POTENTIAL

3. (SBU) According to Novotna, the GOS is concentrating its efforts on preparations for a human pandemic disease. The ministry is arranging crisis management exercises that will simulate an outbreak in the human population. Kramare hospital in Bratislava has a section dedicated to isolating highly contagious individuals. There is also a lab in Zvolen (central Slovakia) that can quickly isolate sub-types of AI as they develop (all samples would also be sent to the EU coordinating lab in the UK). The ministry is preparing an assessment of its medical protective gear and proposing financing to cover any deficiencies. Finally, the GOS has contracts with pharmaceutical companies which require them to provide vaccinations and anti-virals that are created once a sub-type is identified. (Comment: it is still not certain how much of any new drug Slovakia would actually receive or what priority the country has with pharmaceutical companies as opposed to others with similar contracts. End Comment.)

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

4. (SBU) The ministry is moving cautiously with its public announcements. It has prepared booklets which explain the risks of AI and the threat to humans but it is concerned that releasing the information may cause undue alarm even though the human risk is low. When the Minister of Health recently announced on television that prevention begins with frequent handwashing and general good nutrition, it resulted in reports of hoarding seasonal influenza vaccinations (though pharmacies have reported to Novotna that their supplies are still adequate). The ministry will, nevertheless release a leaflet to veterinarians that explains what to look for and to whom to report any suspicious occurrences. The GOS is also in contact with its Embassies in the region and in particular with locations with confirmed cases of AI. Communication among EU nations has also been good, according to Novotna, especially in the sharing of other member state's best practices.

5. (SBU) Comment. Embosfs emphasized the importance of transparency and communication to ensure that occurrences were properly tracked and dealt with, both locally and

globally. This seemed particularly important after the Ministries of Agriculture and State Veterinary and Food Administration directed us to the Ministry of Health for comment and Novotna began the discussion by asking whether we checked with the aforementioned organizations. Nevertheless, Novotna was very knowledgeable and spoke openly about the realities of Slovakia's readiness for AI.

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